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ABSTRACT

The success of a writing across the curriculum project is described in this paper. The paper notes that the first two years of the project, sponsored by internal university grants and state funding, consisted of (1) workshops and training sessions of small numbers of non-English faculty in designing and evaluating writing assignments and in investigating the theory and teaching of writing, (2) a discussion series on "solving the writing crisis," and (3) the establishment of a writing center. The paper also shows how the beginning of a two-year federal grant has allowed for release time for three English faculty members to work closely with faculty in other disciplines to develop writing components in content area courses. Other components of the university-wide project that are described include summer workshops for faculty development, the training of English faculty to work on collaborative learning, peer tutor training, and writing assignment design involving reasoning and cognitive skill development. (RL)

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Writing Across the Curriculum from the Point of View of a Department Chair

College teachers of English have always known that it is not possible to satisfactorily teach writing in one or two courses during the freshman year. We have always known that learning to write well is like learning how to do any other special skill well--it requires instruction combined with a lot of practice over a lengthy period of time. Many of us have wished in the past that we would be able to require an English department writing course every year of a college student's four year program. Failing to achieve that, some of us came up with other methods of imposing more writing or more expectation for writing on our students. Some of us suggested, for example, requiring a senior exit exam in writing combined with an optional special English department writing course. To lure students into writing courses we created what we thought were more relevant writing courses--Business Writing, Writing for Engineers, and other writing courses aimed at specific professions or technical disciplines to be taught by English faculty. Some of us, because we could not convince academic programs to require an additional three or four credits of an English writing course, created writing centers. These have ranged from drop-in fix-it shops staffed by part-time personnel, all the way up to large, semiautonomous operations that offered no credit mini-courses, workshops, and specialized help in writing of all kinds from remedial work to grant proposal writing. At

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larger institutions these centers frequently offered assistance in math instruction and reading, as well, and usually made extensive use of a large variety of media equipment.

In short, we have tried many things--the ones I've mentioned here and others--in good faith and with varying degrees of success and support to meet our service mission of writing instruction.

And what of those English departments that were unsuccessful in securing the funds or the authorization to offer their students something beyond the basic freshman writing requirement? Faced with the impossibility of doing it right, many departments have tried to ignore the writing problem. They have left it up to a writing director who simply turned it over as much as possible to graduate students. Those departments without graduate programs have tried to bargain, at least, for small composition classes (15-20 students), although frequently, in exchange, they've had to teach an extra section or two. And the results have been mixed. Some success with the best students, some failure with the worst, and in the middle a great deal of dissatisfaction--on the part of frustrated English faculty, on the part of discontented students, and on the part of our campus colleagues, who, misunderstanding the true nature of writing instruction, complain, "Why can't the English department teach our students how to write?"

Writing Across the Curriculum is another attempt at solving the writing problem, and from my point of view, an English department Chairman at a landgrant state university, an extremely important and highly successful one.

Montana State University has science, engineering, and agricultural orientations with large business, education, and nursing programs, as well. We have 11,000 students, and although there is not a University-wide requirement for freshman writing, about 95% of all university programs require it. The service mission is an important one to the English faculty. We take it seriously, have invested much time and money over the years in trying to fulfill it. And like many other departments in this kind of setting, we have had to work hard to keep from becoming merely a service department to the rest of the University.

Our Writing Across the Curriculum project is in its early stages although we have been working toward it for almost three years. The first two years, sponsored by internal university grants and state funding consisted of workshops and training sessions of small numbers of non-English faculty in designing and evaluating writing assignments, and in investigating the theory and teaching of writing. A discussion series entitled "Solving the Writing Crisis" sponsored by English, Marketing and Management, Psychology, and Speech Communication was another fruitful consciousness raising activity. Along the way a modest writing center was established to serve remedial students identified by the federally sponsored ABC Program (Advance by Choice). Other internal grants for curriculum revision in English and for the investigation of computer-assisted instruction in English, set the stage for this academic year and the beginning of a two year federal grant from the Department of Education. This is a FIPSE grant (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education)

with matching University funds. As a result of this grant we have been able to give release time to three English faculty to work closely with faculty from other disciplines in the development of reasoning skills and writing components in their classes. Samples of this collaborative effort have included thesis formulation and support work in a finance course, pre-writing activities and other writing assignment materials in an introductory nursing course, and the use of microthemes to teach thinking skills in an introductory mass-lecture course in Physics. Other experiments presently progressing include tutorial assistance for students in a sociology course which is placing greater emphasis than before on writing; weekly peer-graded short writing assignments in a large introductory business course; writing assignments focusing on career planning in a physical education course; and question/discovery journals in a ceramics design course. This is only a sample of the many activities underway across our campus in writing. At the end of this academic year we expect many hundreds of students beyond the freshman level will have done more writing in subject matter courses than ever before, with many of their instructors being weaned away from objective tests and quizzes for memory and recitation toward writing to develop and assess higher cognitive processes of learning. We also expect to disprove the contention that thoughtful writing can be taught and learned only in small classes.

In the summer we will sponsor a month long workshop for 35 faculty from across campus, including five additional English faculty for work on

collaborative learning, peer tutor training, and writing assignment design involving reasoning and cognitive skill development.

Next year, in addition to continued involvement with writing development in the courses of target departments, we expect to conduct a two-day workshop for every department on campus, thereby attracting an additional 75 faculty.

In the end our vision includes well over 100 faculty from across campus representing every degree-granting discipline at Montana State who will be requiring writing exercises, grading those writing assignments, and giving appropriate instruction in writing for the discipline.

The key element, I believe, in the success we have enjoyed so far in our writing across the curriculum project, has been our perspective that good writing is not simply good grammar, spelling, and punctuation--the view usually held by our colleagues in other disciplines. Good writing is not writing according to a prescribed formula or pattern. Our selling point has been this: that writing is a function of thinking and learning. Students learn better when they write about what they learn, and they learn to think better in their discipline when their writing assignment requires them to think as a physicist, an historian, or a sociologist. In this project students do real world writing, relevant to their specialties, their learning, and their futures. Such writing we believe can best be evaluated by another physicist, historian or sociologist--not an English teacher.

From the point of view of this department chairman, the English department at Montana State is undertaking several important and enlightened activities.

First, we are helping to rescue freshman writing from that awesome burden it was never meant to bear. It was never meant to be the primary, and as it turned out, the exclusive, writing experience of college students. We are helping to place it back where it rightfully belongs--as a course which serves only as an introduction to college writing.

Second, I sense, too, we are rescuing each other, we the English faculty, from that fearsome psychological burden of being the only ones on campus interested in, and responsible for, writing instruction. There is a growing consciousness about the nature of good writing across campus, and a growing commitment and enthusiasm on the part of our colleagues and administrators to its instruction. Faculty in the disciplines are beginning to accept responsibility for the writing done by their own students.

Third, there is a renewed vigor in the English department, a renewed sense of professionalism. The rippling effect is noticeable as several faculty members not directly aligned with the Writing Across the Curriculum project are beginning to pursue research in complementary activities.

Fourth, it is a rare department on campus that has ever hosted meetings, seminars, and workshops for the purpose of improving and developing the skills and interests of faculty in other departments. These efforts at collegiality and cross disciplinary discussion have been recognized and approved by all participants as the most significant activity undertaken in living memory to promote a true community of scholars.

Lastly, and most importantly, I think our students are being served better. They will do more writing, more thinking, and more problem-solving

in their four years than any student at Montana State has done previously. I think they will learn more ultimately and be better equipped as graduates to pursue their careers. Hopefully, at some point in the future, they will come to enjoy and benefit from that sense of freedom and confidence that comes to one who has achieved a degree of mastery in an art of self-expression.